

Understanding the Transfer of Prepositions: Arabic to English

By Khadija Lakkis and Mirna Abdel Malak

Learning English is becoming essential in a time of worldwide communication, and theoreticians and language teachers have long recognized the important role that a native language (L1) has in the acquisition of a second language (L2). The purpose of the current study is to examine the extent to which Arab students rely on their L1 prepositional knowledge in acquiring an understanding of prepositional usage in English.

Around 40 years ago the transfer concept was first introduced in the contrastive analysis (CA) hypothesis, which assumes that certain elements in the first language hinder second language acquisition through negative interference. Therefore, linguists assumed that by contrasting L1 and L2 they could foresee those areas in which the learners would have difficulties. However, after 1960 the role of the native language in learning a second language started to be regarded as facilitative because of the underlying similarities of languages. These similarities emanate from “language universals” (Koda 1988; Smith 1978).

When we speak about the transfer of prepositions from L1 to L2, we must recognize the fact that in English, prepositions are difficult to learn and teach. As Pittman (1966) describes, prepositions “have earned a reputation for difficulty if not a downright unpredictability.” Takahaski (1969) stated that the correct usage of prepositions is the greatest problem for learners of English.

The source of the problem is that until recently linguists have not adequately described prepositions and consequently have not taught them systematically (Zughoul 1973). However, Dandan (1968) believes that it is when prepositions have literal equivalents and parallel distributions and usage in both the L1 and L2 that learners have little difficulty in acquiring the second language prepositional usage.

Review of Literature

A number of studies were conducted to examine which aspects of a native language transfer to a target language. The CA hypothesis assumes that L2 learners tend to transfer to their L2 utterances the formal features of their L1. However, Lado (James 1980) believes that individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture. As for grammatical structures, Lado (Gass and Selinker 1983) observed cases where those of the native language were transferred to the foreign language. This transfer occurs so subtly that learners are not aware of it unless it is called to their attention. Also, Adjernian (Gass and Selinker 1983) believes that given enough similarities between the native and target languages, the properties of lexical items and

the rules they are related to are transferred. He believes that lexical transfer includes transfer of underlying lexical properties.

On the other hand, Gass (1978) proposed that an adequate description of language transfer cannot be given without considering the target language. She assumes that transfer can occur when the second language learner is aware of the similarities as well as the differences between the two languages. This view is supported by Ringbom (1992), who believes that transfer depends on how closely the L1 is related to the L2. The closer the two languages, the greater number of cognates, and the congruence of the grammatical systems will facilitate learning the target language. He acknowledges that even though cognates may be deceptive, the context allows learners to eliminate any misunderstandings caused by false cognates.

The target language and its closeness to L1 play a role in promoting language transfer, but several other factors also influence transfer. Kellerman (Gass and Selinker 1983) regards the learners' perceptions of the nature of L2 as a variable involved in language transfer. This transfer depends on the perceived distance between L1 and L2, which constantly changes for learners as they acquire more of the target language. Olshtain (Gass and Selinker 1983) states that the learners' perceptions play a role in language transfer, and that perception of language universality increases the likelihood of transfer. Finally, Postmand (Ellis 1965) believes practice is a factor in producing negative or positive transfer. Increasing practice on the original task increases positive transfer, and with little practice, negative transfer occurs.

Therefore, although some theorists believe that certain linguistic elements are transferred from L1 to L2, others emphasize the need to examine the closeness of L1 and L2. Moreover, other factors, such as the perceived distance between the languages and the amount of practice a learner gets, play a role in influencing transfer.

The Present Study

When we compare the prepositional uses in Arabic and English, we find prepositions in English that have equivalents in Arabic and others that do not. There are structures that are equivalent in both languages and others that are not.

This study identifies the areas in which negative and positive transfer occur in using prepositions. It can thus help English teachers of Arab students to anticipate those areas in which the students might encounter problems, thereby allowing teachers to help students avoid interference by highlighting the differences between the two languages.

Methodology

The subjects in this study were the entire population of the University Orientation Program (UOP) at the American University of Beirut (AUB). UOP students had English proficiencies, measured by the TOEFL or English Entrance Exam (EEE), considered to be below the accepted standard for success in a university whose courses are all offered in English. For this reason, they were enrolled in UOP to upgrade their skills in English.

The overall population at UOP consisted of 70 students. Nevertheless, due to absences, only 55 students participated in the study. These students had various linguistic backgrounds. Some were French educated; some were English educated; and others were Arabic educated. For all of them the L1 was Arabic. Because these students had different levels of English, we grouped students according to the results of a placement test they took before enrolling. As a result of this grouping, we had three levels: 12 students were at the advanced level, 32 high intermediate, and 11 low intermediate.

To improve their skills, students in these levels were offered 20 credits of English per week: 6 hours of writing, 5 hours of reading, 4 hours of grammar, 2 hours of listening, 2 hours of vocabulary, and 1 hour of idioms. At the end of one semester, students were expected to obtain a score of 575 on the TOEFL (equivalent to a 500 on the EEE) to be accepted for the sophomore class, or a 525 score (equivalent to a 450 on the EEE) for acceptance into the freshman class.

A test was constructed to measure whether students transferred their prepositional knowledge from L1 to L2. This test had 40 items. Each item consisted of a sentence, most with one error in prepositional usage. These sentences were gathered mainly from students' writings, with some modifications made to them. Errors in these sentences were categorized into three parts: adding a preposition where it was not needed, dropping a preposition where it was needed, using the wrong preposition. The remaining items contained no errors. The distribution we selected reflected the ratio in an error analysis previously conducted on these students. They were asked to circle the error in each sentence, classify it according to the above three categories, and correct it.

Procedure

Near the end of the spring semester of 1998, two weeks before the final exams at UOP, the test was administered to each level of the target subjects alone. Instructions were carefully read and explained to the students.

The collected and analyzed data were differentiated according to the following areas of similarities and differences: structures in which the verb in one language takes a preposition and in the other language does not; structures that use a different preposition in the two languages; structures in which more than one preposition in one language was possible in the same place in the other language. Items in each category were analyzed by computing the number of students who scored correctly and the number who did not. The questions the researcher wanted answered were: Did a large number of students know the answer because it was similar to its Arabic equivalent, because they had been previously instructed about it, or because it was frequently used in English? The results of these questions were compared to discover where the transfer from Arabic caused confusion and where it helped.

Results and Discussion

All students thought the test was difficult, and at best had 18 out of the 40 questions correct. In general, they had similar mistakes. However, the main distinction among the levels was in the average time each level took to finish the test. The advanced level students averaged 25 minutes, the high intermediate had an average of 35 minutes, and the low intermediate took 45 minutes. It

is worth noting that among low intermediate level students, there were 3 students who could not cope with the test, one of whom did not finish the test.

The following paragraphs summarize those areas students found difficult and those which they thought easy. They also describe where the native language helped students and where it confused them.

When verbs that do not take prepositions in the Arabic equivalent, like compete, wait, result (meaning result in), collide, and engage were used in sentences without prepositions, only a small number of students corrected the errors. The number increased to 20 students where a frequently used verb such as wait was used. The number decreased to 12 students with the verb compete and to 7 students with collide. Five students corrected result, in the sense of cause, by adding in, whereas 5 corrected it by adding from (probably because they had come across this structure). Forty students realized that engage needs a preposition, with. Five selected the preposition with, instead of to to follow engage. Reach in English is not followed by the preposition, although in Arabic the expression reach to his destination is used. This word is frequently used, and 43 students dropped the preposition after reach.

When verbs that use different prepositions in L1 and L2 were in sentences with the corresponding L1 prepositions, 40 percent of the students corrected the errors. For example, 18 students realized that speak to is an acceptable form in English, but in Arabic speak with is used. Twenty students corrected running election to running for elections. Although 18 knew that object on is not used in English, only 8 could correct it. Whereas, 25 students realized that work in low salaries is not proper English, only 15 were able to provide the correct preposition. And 25 students knew that exchange by is not used in English, but only 17 supplied the word for. The number of students who answered correctly dropped to eight when it came to changing control on to control over, to seven when it came to shocked at, and to four when it came to sit in a chair. Only two students corrected lie on to lie to and one changed work in their farms to work on their farms. For the phrase made from, only 25 students changed it to made of, although they had been taught this.

Where Arabic does not distinguish between prepositions but English does, the students learned the rules of when to use each. Fifty students (92 percent) were able to use among and between in the appropriate place. Thirty-two students were able to distinguish between since and for, and 32 students knew the difference between beneath and under. The number decreased to 26 in distinguishing between to and for because students are rarely taught this distinction, while the difference between since and for, and among and between, are taught.

The distinction between at/in or at/on is a special case in this category since in Arabic there is no equivalent for the preposition at, so either in or on is used instead. Therefore, the students were confused when deciding which preposition to use. They were not taught that in is used with the general, on with the less general, and at with the specific. Because both Arabic and English use the expression in Paris, 50 students changed at Paris to in Paris. However, when different prepositions are used in both languages, fewer students knew the correct answers. For example, in Arabic in is used instead of on in the following expressions: on Bliss Street and on the 20th of August. Twenty-five students knew the correct prepositions. In the expression on 4 o'clock,

which is a direct translation from Arabic, 47 students changed on to at. Although the two expressions differ from Arabic to English, many students knew the answer because this expression is frequently used by teachers. For example, a teacher may say, “I came to class at 10” or “At what time are you coming to my offices?”

When two prepositions in English are possible, at least 60 percent used the one that is closer to their native language, even if the other possibility is more frequently used in English. For example, 31 students changed speak to to speak with because speak with, is a direct translation from Arabic. In the expression “I study in/at AUB,” 30 students opted for “I study in AUB” even though at is more frequently used in this situation.

As for the structures or verbs that use equivalent prepositions in both languages, a minimum of 17 students corrected the errors. Thirty-eight students knew that “stop telling me about things which I know nothing” needs a preposition; 25 corrected the sentence “frogs can alter their color to blend to their environment” by adding either in before to or by replacing to with with. About 20 students realized that “with Huckleberry Finn marked the first time...” contains an unnecessary preposition. Finally, 17 students knew that result must be followed by from when it means caused by. However, the expressions “the instinct of survival responsible for our evolution” and “our instinct for survival is responsible for our evolution” are used both in English and Arabic. Only 3 students knew that in the second case, English uses for instead of of.

This study also included students who were not fluent in Arabic. Only a few could correct the errors in such structures. Thirty-five students corrected the phrase “AUB, where I study in.” This high number can be explained because in Arabic the equivalent for both where or when is in which. Even in English, if where and when are to be replaced, they would be replaced by in which not which. Although where and in which seem to be different structures, in reality, they are equal. The students must have noticed that to use in after where is redundant.

Three items in this test contained phrasal verbs, where the verb + the preposition constituted a meaning different from the meaning of the verb. As a result, such structures could not have an equivalent structure and meaning in L1. For example, chase after is a phrasal verb meaning follow, while chase alone means follow to capture or kill. None of the students realized that the phrase “the bereaved father was chasing the ambulance” needed the preposition after. The same applies to along, “like I walked along the street” which means from one end to the other, while along with means in addition to. Eight students noted that in the structure “numerous differences distinguish the two groups along the fact needed the preposition with.” The verb figure means imagine, while figure out means arrive at a conclusion. Twenty students knew that figure needed the preposition out, not up. Thus, students had difficulty correcting or constructing phrasal verbs except those with which they were familiar.

Conclusion

Based on our results, we concluded that in the case of prepositions, students rely on transfer to judge the appropriate usage of prepositions. Deviation occurred when learning had already taken place, either in the form of instruction or frequent exposure. For this reason, an instructor of English, whose native language is Arabic, can use the students’ L1 for structures that use

equivalent prepositions in both languages. On the other hand, whenever there are verbs or expressions in the L1 and L2 that have different structures, that take prepositions, or that have no equivalent in one of the languages, instructors should point out these differences to their students. Also, rules help students choose the correct preposition, so whenever there is a rule that simplifies the usage of prepositions, instructors should call the students' attention to it. In addition, when more than one preposition is possible for the same verb, instructors need to explain the differences. Our data show that to allow students to master these structures (verb + preposition), instructors must continuously expose students to correct prepositional usage since the frequency of occurrence of a structure promotes the correct usage of the preposition.

NOTE: Special thanks to Dr. K. Shaaban, who supervised and assisted this work.

References

- Dandan, N. 1968. Sources of English prepositions. Unpublished, MA Thesis, American University of Beirut.
- Ellis, H. C. 1965. The transfer of learning. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Gass, S. 1978. Language transfer and universal grammatical relations. *Language Learning*, 29, pp. 327-344.
- Gass, S., and L. Selinker. 1983. *Language transfer in language learning*. MA: Newbury House Publishers, Inc.
- James, C. 1980. *Contrastive analysis*. Essex: Longman.
- Koda, K. 1988. Cognitive process in second language reading: Transfer of L1, reading skills and strategies. *Second Language Research*, 4, pp. 133-156.
- Pittman, G. A. 1966. *Activating the use of prepositions*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd.
- Ringbom, H. 1992. On L1, transfer in L2 comprehension and L2 production. *Language Learning*, 42, pp. 85-112.
- Smith, M. S. 1978. Strategies, language transfer and the simulation of the second language learner's mental operations. *Language Learning*, 29, pp. 344-361.
- Takahashi, G. 1969. Perceptions of space and function of certain English prepositions. *Language Learning*, 19, pp. 217-234.
- Zughoul, M. R. 1973. *Teaching English prepositions to Arab students*. Unpublished MA Thesis, American University of Beirut.

Khadija Lakkis is a TEFL/TESL instructor in the University Orientation Program at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon.